



**Mid-Level
District Staff and
Instructional Improvement**

By Dr. Patricia Burch and Dr. James Spillane



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Leading From the Middle: Mid-Level Central Office Staff and Instructional Improvement

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Executive Summary

No silver bullets for improving achievement for all students exist. However, anyone whose paycheck comes from a school district is ultimately responsible for these students. *Leading From the Middle: Mid-Level District Staff and Instructional Improvement*, the first in a series of reports drawn from a larger, qualitative study of district/school interactions, is significant new research that looks at the critical leadership role that mid-level central office staff play in implementing district reforms. While volumes have been written about the important leadership roles of superintendents and their instructional initiatives, our research examines leadership at the intersection between schools and districts. From this vantage point, mid-level central office staff emerge as pivotal actors in the two-way translation and communication between top district leadership and school-level staff around instructional

initiatives. Our research suggests that mid-level managers have significant impact on how district reform policies are understood and acted on by school leaders. Mid-level staff are program managers, content area directors, budget specialists, and others who administer or manage programs or services but are not in top cabinet positions, such as deputy superintendents or chief education officers.

After superintendents and school boards establish new policies, mid-level staff have the job of translating big ideas like “improving literacy district-wide “ or “closing the achievement gap” into strategies, guidelines, and procedures that are handed down to schools. We argue that mid-level administrators who bring school people to the table to pool their expertise and then translate this collective expertise into strategies, guidelines, tools, and procedures are more likely to be successful in making district instructional reforms relevant to classroom practice.

Building on scholarship from within and outside of education, we propose a re-conception of the work of mid-level district staff from a communities of practice perspective. From this perspective, mid-level central office staff occupy a strategic position in between the innovations unfolding inside the schools, within and across different central office departments, and beyond. We call this work brokering and identify an array of activities through which mid-level staff broker resources, knowledge, and ideas within and across the district.



Mid-Level Central Office Staff as Brokers

Borrowing from the work of socio-cultural theorist Etienne Wenger, we apply the term brokering to the work of mid-level central office staff. Brokering represents a distinctly different way of thinking about the work of districts in instructional reform. As brokers, district offices are primarily responsible for cultivating the exchange of information and expertise within and across schools, between schools and third parties, and between instructional leaders working at the very top of the system and those running reforms from inside the school. In this way, central office staff members help determine how principals, teachers, and other school administrators perceive and act on district instructional reform policies.

In the accounts from 55 mid-level managers from three urban, public school districts, we describe their brokering roles as:

- **Tools Designers** who translate reform agendas into tangible materials for schools to use.
- **Data Managers** who work with implementation and student outcome data to help teachers and principals use it to improve instruction.
- **Trainers and Support Providers** who design staff development and training to support instructional leadership at different levels.
- **Network Builders** who create routines and practices that build or sustain connections between people who have expertise to share but little contact.

These roles are not intended to reflect central office staff job titles but are drawn from central office staffs' own descriptions of their work. An individual central office administrator, regardless of her formal job title, may assume some or all of these functions in her day-to-day work.

Contrasting Approaches to Brokering

Our research shows that while most district staff view brokering as important, they construct their roles in distinctly different ways. Based on mid-level managers' own accounts of their work, we have identified two distinct orientations they have about where expertise for reform resides. These orientations affect the attitude that they bring to their work and to their interactions with principals, teachers, and other schools staff.

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1. Authoritative Orientation: Mid-level managers with this orientation see themselves and others as experts and see principals, teachers, and other school staff primarily as targets and beneficiaries of their own and others' expertise. **From this perspective, a primary goal of brokering is to cultivate exchanges that channel expertise to schools.**

2. Collaborative Orientation: Mid-level managers with this orientation see principals and teachers not simply as targets of policy change but as substantive sources of expertise as well. **From this perspective, a primary goal of brokering is to foster exchanges that help central office staff learn from and become more informed by schools' expertise and reform experiences.**

In our analysis, we found that the majority of mid-level central office staff brought an authoritative orientation to their interactions with schools. We argue that the predominance of an authoritative orientation in district/school interactions is problematic and undercuts district efforts to improve instruction district-wide. While far fewer mid-level managers have a collaborative orientation to brokering, we believe that their approach to working with schools is essential in creating communities of practice around instructional reform.

Communities of Practice within District Reform

Because of our focus on district/school interactions, we use a framework drawn from the literature on communities of practice by Wenger. His pioneering work looks at interactions and relationships between people, the connections people make across work places and from different organizations, and the collective knowledge they build. Drawing on Wenger's definition, a community of practice refers to the informal relationships that school leaders, district staff, and third parties (such as foundations, universities, and school reform organizations) cultivate in order to improve the quality of teaching across all schools within a city. A central activity of a community of practice is to gather expertise and create processes and practices (we call tools) in order to support and sustain collective work around a given agenda.

Most of the mid-level staff who we interviewed reported that they cultivated and valued relationships at multiple levels inside and outside the district and identified them as important to their work. We distinguish three communities that mid-level central office staff identified as important to their work: 1) relationships with other district office staff; 2) relationships with school staff members; and 3) relationships with reformers and/or scholars working nationally or locally on instructional change.

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Four Barriers that Prevent Change in Central Office Support to Schools

We argue that from a communities of practice perspective, the quality of district instructional support to schools can only improve when both mid-level staff and school leaders find value in their interactions. This study describes four common barriers, as seen from school level, that prevent central staff and school leaders from interacting in productive ways—ways that leverage the knowledge and skills from within schools and from outside the district to help improve student learning:

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1. *School Relationships Seen as Low*

Priorities: Mid-level staff spend little time in direct communication with school staff and feel burdened with district meetings and paperwork that take precedence over their work with schools.

2. *Communications Based on*

Directives, Not Dialogue: When mid-level district staff do have contact with schools, they spend too much time communicating policy expectations and too little time in substantive conversation about teaching and learning with school leaders.

3. *Administrators Lack Understanding of School Issues:*

School principals and teachers want central office staff to visit schools and experience first-hand the challenges they encounter every day. Instead, schools are recipients of directives, memos, and emails from people who most likely have never been in their schools or classrooms.

4. *Central Office Staff Lack Expertise Around Teaching and Learning:*

Across districts, school leaders viewed the knowledge of district staff about teaching and learning (process and content) as a weak link in district support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on school accounts, district staff still have much work to do to demonstrate the commitment and knowledge it takes to partner with schools in improving teaching and learning. School staff were more likely to identify the district staff as partners in work and to regularly seek their help when they encountered district staff who:

- engaged school staff in two-way dialogues;
- sought out opportunities to listen to principals and teachers;
- valued and learned from school staff's expertise and experience with reforms;
- demonstrated knowledge of teaching and learning.

We believe that the opportunity for an entire system of schools to succeed at improving teaching and learning can be strongly affected by mid-level staff creating communities of practice in which school personnel (principals, teachers, and other school staff) are partners with the district in determining how instructional policies are designed, translated, and implemented. To do this, districts need to fundamentally redesign how central office staff interact with schools.

District leaders should:

1. Make school issues and needs drive the district's policy agenda. In order to do this, districts should draw on the enormous expertise of principals and teachers in the design of new reform policies and implementation strategies and create new communication and support structures.

2. Redefine the role of mid-level central office staff so that their primary responsibilities are to support and facilitate instructional leadership rather than to issue directives and monitor compliance.

3. Reorganize the work of mid-level staff so they can spend more time in schools in order to appreciate the complexities of implementing initiatives and to enable them to translate their understanding into tool creation. Visits to schools by mid-level central office staff need to take precedence over district meetings "downtown."

4. Invest in on-going professional development for mid-level managers so that staff learn to more effectively support schools, to deepen their knowledge about teaching and learning, and to integrate their work with other central office departments.

5. Evaluate mid-level staff member's performance based on their ability to facilitate instructional improvements in schools.

6. Minimize interruptions that distract school and central office staff from focusing on instruction by reducing paper work, minimizing countless phone calls, emails, and faxes sent to principals, and by eliminating excessive district meetings that require principals' attendance.

Who We Are

The Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, a national network of school reformers, currently operates in nine cities—Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Seattle. We advocate for sweeping policy changes and practices to transform school districts by moving additional authority, resources, and accountability to the school level. We seek to reconnect schools with their communities and completely redesign the role of central offices in urban school districts.

The Cross City Campaign believes that fundamental improvement in public education requires bold action by people in different sectors working together, forming a national network that is rooted locally and is culturally diverse. We are advocates, teachers, principals, central office administrators, policy analysts, researchers, union officials, community organizers, parents, students, and funders. We provide leadership-development training and technical assistance, produce research-driven publications and practical tools, connect reformers through cross-site visits and national meetings, and build local and national constituencies to advance reform efforts.

Cross City Campaign members believe dialogue and debate are critical for real reform to occur. If we are to break through the status-quo and make significant improvements in all schools, we must be open to discourse and debate. From mutual respect will come the power to ensure that all young people get the very best that education has to offer. The Cross City Campaign provides a forum for this critical exchange to occur.

Since our inception in 1993, the Cross City Campaign has been a leader in promoting and writing about urban district redesign. The fundamental question driving this work has been, “What is the role of the central office in improving instruction?” Our first publication, *Reinventing Central Office: A Primer for Successful Schools*, made a strong case for rethinking district functions and recommended a dramatic revision of urban public school systems, one that shifted most of the funds and authority to the schools and dismantled centralized, bureaucratic structures. A number of years later, as our vision of the district’s role in supporting schools evolved, we published *Changing Rules and Roles: A Primer on School-Based Decision Making*. In this publication, Angus McBeath, the superintendent of the Edmonton Public Schools (Alberta, Canada), described how his district created a radically different role for the central office. We learned from Edmonton how an urban district, with a strong center and an unwavering focus on student achievement, could em-

power principals and teachers and redesign the central office to support their work.

In *Leading From the Middle*, the Cross City Campaign continues to explore the district’s role in instructional reform. In the fall of 2000, we initiated a three-year qualitative study in three urban school districts that examined the role and importance of district/school interactions in the implementation of local instructional improvement. The three districts—Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle—already had promising systemic reform initiatives underway as well as experience in decentralizing authority and resources to schools. The multi-year research project was led by Dr. Patricia Burch (primary investigator), who oversaw researchers working in the three districts, and by Dr. James Spillane (project consultant). The project was directed by the Cross City Campaign. This report draws from a subset of that data and looks at the role of middle-level central office staff and their relationships with staff in local schools. *Leading From the Middle* provides an important perspective on the role of the school district in improving instruction and will form the basis of a national dialogue throughout our network.

The Cross City Campaign does not assert that the perceptions or experiences surfaced in this report are statistically representative of the districts as a whole. However, the perceptions and experiences reflected here represent those that were prevalent among the interview subjects.

Related Publications from the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform:

Reinventing Central Office: A Primer for Successful Schools

This report presents a provocative description of a school system where resources, authority, and accountability reside primarily at the school level.

Changing Rules and Roles: A Primer on School-based Decision Making

This is a description of a redesigned central office based on a keynote presentation by Angus McBeath, superintendent of Edmonton Public Schools.

School-Based Budgeting: Your Money, Your Business

This workbook demystifies the school district budget, details how to read a local school budget, illustrates how to link a school budget to achievement, and explores innovations across the country.

Beyond Finger-Pointing and Test Scores

This report examines district interventions in low-performing schools in six cities in Cross City Campaign's network.

Strong Neighborhoods, Strong Schools: A Comprehensive Series of Reports on the Findings of the Indicators Project on Education Organizing

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Small Schools, Big Imaginations: A Creative Look at Urban Public Schools

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The Politics of Urgency

In this keynote presentation, Michelle Fine provides images of urgency, debunks commonly held myths, and offers recommendations for educating urban kids.

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